

THE DAY AFTER THE FIRE

In an essay published in 2019, *The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics*¹, art historian and specialist in ecology T. J. Demos draws a deeply troubling portrait of the environmental catastrophe engulfing the planet, to the point of pushing us into what he calls “the Pyrocene, the geological age of fire.” A crisis of unprecedented scope, aggravated, according to Demos, by the return of fascism and an impressive capacity for denial.

This is the perilous context in which the exhibition *Le lendemain de l’incendie / The Day After the Fire* was conceived. Arising from extremely varied contexts and disciplines, the fiction, video, and pictorial and conceptual works of which it is composed—those of Charlotte Brontë, Stefan Brüggeman, Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik in collaboration with Coco Klockner, Jean Rhys, Erin Thurlow, Lawrence Weiner, and myself—offer no easy solution to these issues (naturally). (Do they even exist?) Rather, they all propose rich, nuanced visions of fire.

Indeed, fire is presented both as a destructive element yet also as a vector for potential change, against which it is not always advisable to fight. Fire may certainly destroy lives, homes, ecosystems, but it can also regenerate forests, heat the indigent, and channel the rage of the oppressed. Let’s take a look.

- Published in 1847, Charlotte Brontë’s famous gothic novel, *Jane Eyre*, is set in the United Kingdom in the early 19th century. After an unhappy childhood, Jane becomes the governess for the child of nobleman, Edward Rochester. She saves Edward from a fire of suspicious origin, and Rochester soon asks her to marry him. He feels obliged, however, to reveal a

heavy secret: locked in the attic of his mansion, is his first wife, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, whom he had married in Jamaica and who was apparently insane. In desperation, Jane runs away. Subsequently, when she returns to the mansion, she finds it in ruins. Bertha Mason had set it on fire and perished in the flames. Eyre nonetheless finds Rochester. They marry, and from their union comes a child.

- *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, is a novel by Jean Rhys. A post-colonial rewrite of and prequel to *Jane Eyre*, this novel tells the story of Antoinette Cosway Mason, who would become the first wife to Edward Rochester (never named). The first part takes place in Jamaica, around 1833. It tells of Antoinette’s childhood, marked by tensions between her family of former landowners and the former slaves, who, brimming with rage, wind up burning down the estate. The second part is told by a young Englishman (Rochester). He married Antoinette for her dowry. Gossip concerning his wife ends up poisoning their relationship. The third part takes place in England. Rochester has bought a new mansion and hired a maid so as not to worry about his wife any longer. Held prisoner, Antoinette slides into madness, but finally manages to escape the attic where she is held, then—potentially—sets fire to the manor.

- Note that, as a conceptual artist and curator, I appropriated these novels by Brontë and Rhys with the utmost respect, as if they were called upon to be (re)read. (These books thus acquire a dual status: as works in their own right (as novels), and as pieces in my installations.) Five copies of *Wide Saragasso Sea*, washed out by the sun, are lined up on a shelf. On the cover, the sea, merging with an excessively orange

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sky, which takes on a new intensity. As for *Jane Eyre*, fourteen copies are piled on the ground, constituting a fragile monument, or perhaps, who knows, a future book burning...

- *Jane Eyre, Los Angeles* is 9-minute-long video produced by Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik, in collaboration with Coco Klockner, in 2021. It is a queer rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, filmed while California was burning and a lockdown had been decreed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspired by Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and by an essay by Mike Davis, *The Case for Letting Malibu Burn* (1995)ⁱⁱ, the video presents Antoinette (interpreted by the artist and filmmaker Hazel Katz) no longer as locked in a manor, but running in a field not far from Los Angeles. The off-screen voice describes a dystopian landscape—which may become all too familiar.

- *THIS WORK IS REALISED WHEN IT IS BURNED* (2013) is a textual work by conceptual artist of Mexican origin, Stefan Brüggemann. Printed on a large poster, it describes a work that can only exist on condition of being destroyed by fire, like a provocative invitation to arsonists, with a touch of irony regarding its own condition as merchandise, sold in limited editions...

- A bilingual conceptual Statement by Lawrence Weiner—*A BOX MADE OF WOOD BUILT UPON THE ASHES OF A BOX MADE OF WOOD* (1987)—presents itself as two stencils (logically, framed in “boxes made of wood”), accompanied by an envelope on which one can read the artist's Declaration of Intent, which sets the materialization of the work on an aleatory basis. By highlighting materials caught in a cycle of destruction and reconstruction, Weiner presents a profound and poetic reflection on this passing world.

- Erin Thurlow's pictorial series *Dark Times* (2017-ongoing) is comprised of pages from the New York Times that the American artist had painted over in black. He thus very carefully isolates and appropriates images representative of our troubled times, which we must decipher: the ruins of a burned house, a burning trashcan, an isolated skull, armed policemen... With this strategy, Thurlow raises the curtain on the American nightmare. Yet, upon looking more closely at the images, we notice that all is not dark. Some fireflies have survived despite it all.

In fact, if it is true, as Demos put it, that “the future belongs to fire,” the works of Brontë, Brüggemann, Loepky-Kolesnik in collaboration with Klockner, Rhys, Thurlow, Weiner, and myself, each in their way, engage us with forcefulness and clarity in thoughts about the day after the fire.

ⁱ T. J. Demos, “The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 98, February 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/98/256882/the-agency-of-fire-burning-aesthetics/>

ⁱⁱ In this controversial essay, taken from his book *Ecology of Fear* (1998), Mike Davis argues that “Many of California's native ecosystems evolved to burn. Modern fire suppression creates fuels that lead to catastrophic fires. So why,” Davis asks, “do people insist on rebuilding in the firebelt.” <https://longreads.com/2018/12/04/the-case-for-letting-malibu-burn/>

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